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AMERICAN INDIFFERENCE TO AMERICAN ART.

PERHAPS no collection of American pictures that could now be made would so stir the heart of the picture lover as did the first sight of the exhibition of the Society of American Artists in 1878. That was really an oasis, and a very delightful one, in the dreary American Academic Desert—none the less a desert for the gaudily painted French cabarets and dance-houses erected by speculative dealers along the route for the spoiling of our aristocratic money-bags. Hope lay like a sunbeam along those walls, and a youthful confidence and enthusiasm looked out from the pictures, and met half-way an equal confidence and enthusiasm on the part of the spectator.

If all was not poetry, it all seemed to be; although, as poetry had never been present in any exhibition of American pictures since these exhibitions were, there is no doubt we were too ready to take the song of three or four larks for a grove full of melody. To the critic who stood tip-toe upon this little hill with his shoes full of the sand got by wading through twenty years of Academy exhibitions, what wonder if the landscape seemed enchanting—if he took the wild briar for a rose, and the dandelion meadow for a field of the cloth of gold? But, all exceptions made, and that exhibition of 1878 weighed in the scales of time, it seems certain that it contained not a few good works, and the honest promise of much excellence.

If the exhibitions by the same Society that have followed it have seemed, taking the most favorable view, to stand still rather than to advance, this may be mainly accounted for by the shameful indifference of the public and its avowed preference for pictures painted abroad. It is a fact that does not admit of question that, as a rule, the rich, picture-buying American will not if he can help it buy American pictures. We say, as a rule, for there are and have been notable exceptions. We were shown recently a considerable private collection of pictures, all by American artists—each an excellent specimen of its author's skill, and the collection as a whole, most attractive, and doing credit to the owner's taste and judgment. But every one knows that such cases are rare indeed. All the picture dealers tell the same story, and the sales of the yearly exhibitions still confirm it. The young men of this Society are really fighting against heavy odds. They are the best painters we have, yet they have small employment.

We have in New York and Boston a few men who paint portraits in a style that wins admiration even in Paris where are painted the best portraits, yet these men are so stingily employed that it must be hard for them to live. In France such men as Duveneck, Alden Weir, William M. Chase, Wyatt Eaton, Francis Lathrop, Thayer and Vinton would find themselves in full employment; the best people would be painted by them. But, here, if our Museum of Art wants a portrait of its President it gets it painted by Bonnat—and gets as bad a specimen of the Frenchman's art as it deserves. A portrait-painter comes here from England and without trouble secures so many orders that he can with difficulty keep his engagements, yet no good judge can be found who will say that his pictures deserve such success. More meretricious pictures have rarely been painted than the most of these, and their bad drawing and crude color are without excuse.

Is it any wonder that the best exhibition of the year shows no perceptible advance, and that the walls of the Academy are, if possible, a drearier waste of imbecility than ever before?

NEW PICTURES AT THE DEALERS'.

MR. AVERY has on view a picture by Jules Breton, which made a stir when it was shown at the late Salon. It is the outskirts of a little village of Finistère at twilight with a group of four women in dark gowns and white caps in the foreground. They are engaged in serious conversation. Farther back are a pair of lovers and some of the houses of the village. Beyond this point the ground dips abruptly and rises again in a long ridge quite dark against the evening sky. There is much realism in the picture of that poetic sort which is peculiar to Breton since Millet's death. The character of the village population including its pigs and cats, the thick grass and scattered

rocks by the roadside, the masonry of the houses, the sky and the moon which are the same nowhere else, all are characteristic of a Celtic country. Jules Breton has never produced a better picture.

Munkacsy's "The Studio" is a large composition with two figures, one of them being a portrait of the painter himself. It is painted in his well-known manner, and is especially strong in chiaroscuro. It was exhibited at the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1878, when the artist obtained a grand medal of honor. Each of these pictures is worth many visits, and, in fact, neither can be appreciated until it has been seen many times.

Equally in contrast with Breton and Munkacsy, whether we compare his work for sentiment with the one, or for technical expression with the other, are three canvases at the Moore & Clarke Gallery by that frankest and most powerful exponent of the French realistic school, Gustave Courbet, whom Mr. Jarves has not inaptly likened, in his way, to Walt Whitman. It is not difficult to conceive that if our American Browning could handle the brush with the same ease that he does the pen, he would give us just such a sea piece as we find by Courbet in this gallery. There is a heavy iron gray sky and a dark, angry sea with cruel reefs in the foreground made visible for the moment by the parting of the seething breakers; near the horizon are suggested a few fishing boats hurriedly taking in sail as the storm sweeps down in all its fury. The power of the painter is so startling that one does not think for a moment of his uncouth method of expressing himself. The other two canvases by this eccentric Frenchman are a man in hunting costume, intended, it is said, to represent himself, and the study of a flower-bed with a background of trees. Both are characteristic, but neither is important in size nor especially interesting in subject.

My Note Book.



ANDID observers will admit that the picture market, native and foreign, has rarely been so demoralized as it is now. The recent absurd legislation against imported paintings doubtless has something to do with it. But it is by no means the principal cause of

the stagnation, which set in months before Congress distinguished itself in this matter. The chief cause will be found, I believe, in the natural reaction against the instability of the entire business—the cupidity of the dealer and the dishonesty of the auctioneer, and the ignorance of the buyer who so easily becomes the prey of both. In spite of the prevailing extravagance throughout the land and the desire of the rich man to own costly pictures, his purchases do little or nothing for art in this country. Our American Gorgias Midas seldom buys American paintings, and when he gains possession of good foreign works, he, as a rule, with the true spirit of the parvenu, jealously hides them from public view for fear of making them "common," like the famous art treasures, for instance, of the effete aristocracies of Europe. He enriches the dealers by his prodigality, demoralizes foreign artists by his eagerness to own any canvases with their names, and discourages native talent by making it unfashionable.

OUR average American Midas indeed is the natural foe of American art. He buys his art as he buys his land or his stocks, only when he thinks it a good investment—in the same way as he prefers to buy his wife diamonds, instead of gold jewelry made precious by artistic workmanship. Unlike the real man of taste who will confidently acquire the work of unrecognized genius because *he* knows its merit, Mr. Midas, conscious of his own incompetence to form a judgment, selects his pictures first on the *names* of the artists and secondly on the guarantee of the dealer as to their genuineness. It is not strange that the dealer should make all he can out of such a client. He is generally honest in his way; by which I mean that while he charges the most extravagant profits on his purchases

he seldom deceives his patrons as to the genuineness of any picture he may offer them. It may be the worst picture the painter ever produced; but the *name* is genuine, and Mr. Midas stoutly believes that, as on a check or a bill of exchange, the signature is the principal thing.

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WITH the picture dealer of the second class, the genuineness of a signature is a matter of no great importance. You can buy all the Diazes, Corots, and Rousseaus you want at the New York auctions which are supplied by this gentleman, and very often "on the quiet" by the fashionable dealer in Fifth Avenue. When an auctioneer wants material for a mock auction "sale," he does not hesitate to invite the proudest dealer in the city to contribute toward it, and the proudest dealer is not a bit too proud to profit by this irregular way of doing business. A limit is put on the price of his picture. If it is reached, the picture is sold. If not, it is put up again at the next sale. The paintings of Mr. Kohn in Fifth Avenue were advertised recently to be sold at Leavitt's absolutely without reserve. Go to the gallery of his successor, or rather his partner, and see how many of them have been bought in. There is hardly an auctioneer of pictures in New York of whom you can buy with absolute certainty of being fairly treated; and this has become so well known and the public has been so often bitten that it is afraid of the auction room. Was there ever, for example, a worse mock auction than the recent Carroll affair conducted by the new firm of Ortgies & Co., successors to Kirby & Co.?

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THE catalogue announced "over one hundred paintings from the collection of a veteran collector and connoisseur, embracing many superb examples of Old Masters and modern celebrities, now rarely offered at auction to be sold without reserve." It was a curious lot, owned chiefly by Thomas B. Carroll, of Troy, N. Y. Consisting for the most part of rubbish of the worst kind, there were scattered here and there a few pictures of undoubted merit; but upon every one of these so far as their value was known, a reserve price was placed. One was surprised, for example, to see two or three alleged Washington Allstons in such bad company. But they were genuine. The "John Kemble as Coriolanus (after Sir Thomas Lawrence)" with its strangely discolored hands—caused by the unstable pigments often used by Allston in his carnations—and the beautiful "Portrait of Alderman Boydell" were bought at the Ballestier sale in London a few years ago. The head of Washington, showing the left side of the face, attributed to Allston, may be, as it is claimed, one of the many "pot-boiler" copies made by the painter from his original picture now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; but it is certainly unworthy of his reputation. These portraits were bought in, and, I hear, have been offered for exhibition to the committee who have in charge the new loan collection of paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The "Saint and Angels," attributed to Van Schendel, was probably genuine, and the "Charles Carroll of Carrollton," attributed to Sully, undoubtedly was. These were also bought in. There was so little idea of selling the interesting pictures by John Quidor, illustrating Irving's "Knickerbocker" that only two out of the set of eight were exhibited. Two bargains at least were secured by Lanthier, apparently through the ignorance of the owners, who do not seem to have known their value. These were a powerful sketch called "The Captives" and catalogued as "unidentified," but said to be by Le Brun, and a curious little canvas which Lanthier is satisfied is a genuine Cuyp, and which was knocked down to that wide-awake dealer for thirteen dollars.

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A MORE recent auction at Leavitt's of pictures, said to have belonged to "Edgar Mitchell, of Philadelphia," showed a shocking lot of rubbish, containing not a few absolute forgeries. An alleged Kensett, if genuine, was certainly unlike anything that artist is known to have painted; and the vile daubs credited to Constable, Birket-Foster, Kaulbach, Rousseau and Corot could hardly impose upon the veriest tyro. A large landscape attributed to F. E. Church was indignantly repudiated by that artist, who insisted that it be taken from the walls. He had his way, but the picture is pretty sure to appear as his at some other sale; for the person in charge of the gallery professed to be